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SUBJECT: ARAB WOMEN JOURNALISTS STRENGTHEN TIES, QUESTION
PRIORITIES AND PLEDGE TO REACH OUT TO THE USA

This is a joint cable from Embassy Amman and ConGen
Jerusalem.

1. Summary: The third annual conference of the Arab Women's Media Center (AWMC), a Jordanian NGO, brought together 60 women from 12 Arab countries, the Palestinian Authority and Israel in late June. USG sponsorship made it possible for these women to gather in Amman; over 80 percent of the funding for the conference was provided by PAS Amman, NEA/PPD, MEPI and PAS Jerusalem. Despite the divides of history and politics, Arab Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians, Kuwaitis, Iraqis and others all interacted as colleagues and formed a close network. Debate over the "liberation" vs. "occupation" of Iraq impinged on the conference but other, more germane issues dominated: the perceived conflict of national interests with journalistic professionalism and integrity, and the need for Arab media to communicate Arab values, culture, society, and religion to an American audience. U.S. speaker and Newsweek journalist Lorraine Ali, herself an Arab-American, stressed the importance of such outreach. Official Jordanian participants strongly defended the G-8 reform initiative. End summary.

2. Sixty Arab women gathered in Amman, Jordan June 26-29 for the third annual AWMC conference. Fifteen of them were nominated to participate by U.S. missions in their countries. They represented 12 Arab nations -- Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait -- plus the Palestinian Authority and Israel, and in many cases were meeting and interacting for the first time. Iraqi and Saudi participants remarked that this was the first such international conference they had taken part in; an Israeli Arab said it was the first time she felt included as an Arab rather than ostracized for her Israeli passport. The conference received significant USG financial support, with over 80 percent of the funds coming from PAS Amman, NEA/PPD, MEPI and PAS Jerusalem.

"Women Are Coming"

3. The conference adopted "Women Are Coming" as its motto, and the papers presented reflected the progress women have made in the Arab world in recent years. They also made clear that the status of women journalists varies widely across the region and that common challenges persist. Among these challenges are wage disparity, lack of legislative protection (with the exception of Tunisia), perceptions of inferiority, the difficulty of balancing family and career, and negative stereotypes and "objectification" of women in media (e.g., the use of beautiful women to report the weather). The Jordanian Minister of State for Media, Ms. Asma Khader, cited the dual obstacles of quantity and quality and said that while Arab women journalists are making headway against the former, they need more training opportunities to address the latter. A common question was how to exploit newly acquired freedoms -- specifically in Iraq, Algeria, Yemen and Oman.

Truth or Consequences

4. The issue of "national interests" taking precedence over freedom of expression and journalistic professionalism dominated nearly every session of the conference. A number of women asked soul-searching questions about the purpose of Arab media: to support the "Arab cause" or to report the truth. As Jifara Al-Bideri, a Palestinian who works for Al-Jazeera, put it, "Am I Palestinian or am I a journalist?" The participants reached no consensus on this dilemma. The older generation argued for the precedence of journalistic integrity and freedom of expression, while the more junior women appeared devoted to the concept of journalism serving the greater national cause, however defined.

5. More questions arose about the definition of "national interests" vis--vis Arab interests. Calls for greater pan-Arab unity and coordination among women journalists

notwithstanding, it was clear that the divergence of views and interests within individual Arab countries is increasing. Some participants worried about the function of Arab media if widespread self-censorship prevented accurate reporting on what was happening in their own countries, making foreign media the only reliable source of news. American media reporting on the Abu Ghraib prison abuse was cited as an instance where journalistic responsibility won out over short-term national interests -- and in the end served to strengthen the democratic ideals at the core of American society.

Arab-American Makes Plea for Greater Communication

16. Lorraine Ali, a contributing writer for Newsweek who since 9/11 has been covering Arab and Arab-American culture and society, attended the conference as a U.S.G.-funded speaker. She brought an important Arab-American voice and viewpoint to the conference debates. Talking about her multiple identities as an Arab, an American, a woman and a journalist, she advised that professional dedication to freedom of speech and the truth should always come first. Ali highlighted the dearth of knowledge about Arab society and culture, especially the role of women, in America. She encouraged Arab media to speak to the West, in English, and in multiple contexts: politics, arts, music, and social issues.

17. Other conference participants cited the tendency for Arab media to address only other Arabs. Lebanese journalist Guitta Kiamleh challenged the Arab world, and women in particular, to become producers, not just consumers, of media. The flow of information between the United States and the Arab world, she said, should not be solely directed at the Arab audience, but rather should aim for a true exchange of ideas and information.

Iraq: Two Viewpoints

18. Three Iraq women journalists attended the AWMC conference. The first to speak, Sallamah Abdel Hassan from New Iraq Radio, defended her characterization of American actions as "liberation" as opposed to "occupation." She spoke about the rebirth of journalism in post-Saddam Iraq, although she admitted there were no regulations limiting the proliferation of sub-standard publications, and about opportunities for women there. She concluded by saying, "We would rather be ruled by 1,000 Americans than one man from Tikrit."

19. Nada Omran, Iraqi correspondent for Egyptian daily Al-Ahram, spoke forcefully about the censorship practiced by the American "occupation" and criticized media in Iraq for characterizing Iraqis as the "enemy." Unlike those of her colleague Abdel Hassan, Omran's remarks were favorably received by the conference participants as a whole.

GOJ Minister Urges/Defends Reform

10. The issue of reform arose in a session in which Mohammed Daoudiyeh, Jordanian Minister for Political Development, urged the adoption of reform agendas in the Arab world, noting a crisis of citizenship in the region, which he attributed to low internet usage and a lack of women in positions of leadership. The participants objected vigorously to any attempt to impose reform from outside the region. "Who is leading this reform?" they asked. In their view, the United States cannot credibly lead such an effort due to its biased support for Israel; furthermore, they questioned the divorce of reform from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Participants also doubted the willingness of Arab leaders to tolerate women's political participation. Daoudiyeh countered that reform could not be held hostage to the dual challenges of terrorism and occupation, and to oppose reform is, in effect, to support dictatorship. Further, he defended the G-8's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative as both fair and necessary; he urged the participants to look beyond a "made in the USA" label. Overall, conference participants expressed agreement about the necessity for reform to bring equality to women and democracy to Arab citizens across the region, and noted positively BMENA's focus on women's empowerment.

Recognition of USG Support

11. Months into the organization of this program, AWMC head Mahasen Al-Emam said she feared physical and verbal attacks on the AWMC and the conference if its materials featured the

U.S. logo and/or prominent acknowledgement were made of USG funding. Her concern reflected a broader controversy in Jordan, where local NGOs fear rebuke from conservative and Islamist elements for receiving foreign (especially USG) funds -- ironically, given that the GOJ receives millions of dollars in annual foreign assistance. Al-Emam ultimately agreed to acknowledge verbally official U.S. support during the conference, and did so by welcoming and thanking USG representatives in attendance at the opening session. In the end the U.S. role did not become an issue for the participants, AM d58bjbj "T_W_W541

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the conference or its final recommendations.

Final Recommendations

12. After a vigorous debate over whether to endorse a set of recommendations put forward by conference participants or another that the AWMC preferred, the conference adopted the following ten recommendations:

- 1- Calling on the President of the Council of Arab Information Ministers to involve Arab media women in the Council's regular meetings for the purpose of including women in the media-related decision-making process.
 - 2- Constructing new media centers similar to the AWMC in Arab countries that participated in the conference and to ensure that the AWMC conference is held regularly in each country.
 - 3- Constructing an Arabic media library that collects releases and publications of Arab media women from different fields of media.
 - 4- Declaring March 12 a day for Arab Media Women in all Arab countries; such an observance was initiated by AWMC five years ago.
 - 5- Holding training courses for Arab media women, especially Iraqi and Saudi women, according to needs in each country.
 - 6- Working to create pressure groups on the subject of wages and salaries for Arab media women in countries where gender discrimination exists.
 - 7- The Recommendations Formulation Committee must carry out monthly follow-up of the work of the Follow-up Committee in coordination with AWMC.
 - 8- Considering the media code of ethics as recommended by conference participants as the Arab code of ethics to which Arab Media Women are committed, each in their respective countries. (Note: the drafting of a "code of conduct/ethics" was a conference exercise, but no consensus was reached among participants as to the core tenets of such a code. End Note.)
 - 9- Establishing an Arab media network via the Internet to maintain communication among Arab media women, strengthen consultation among them, present Arab media-related issues as they arise, adopt issues related to Arab media women, and put them forth to decision-makers.
 - 10- Strengthening dialogue between Arab media women on one hand and NGOs and international organizations on the other in order to enhance Arab media women's access to decision-making positions.
- Everyone agreed that all Arab media women shall work in their own countries and within the Arab region to support the AWMC's efforts and programs, being the first non-governmental media organization for Arab media women."

Comment

13. PAS Amman and PAS Jerusalem are very pleased with the outcome of the conference. The connections made by the women who participated, the vital issues discussed, and the pledge to follow up on conference recommendations will serve to strengthen Arab media, and the role played by women, in each of the countries represented and across the region. Both posts will follow up with women locally and with the AWMC to explore support for training opportunities and to enhance continued communication among the participants. The venue was also a great opportunity to interact with contacts -- particularly for PDOffs from Jerusalem who are restricted from travel in the West Bank and thus from face-to-face contact with many women journalists who live and work outside of Jerusalem. We thank IIP and MEPI for their support, especially in recruiting Lorraine Ali as a conference participant and speaker.

GNEHM